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ABSTRACT

Knowledge gained from literature is not knowledge that can be classified, abstracted, and transferred to the general context of a body of knowledge such as constitutes psychology or sociology. Extensive literary examples demonstrate that literature can, however, enrich an understanding of what it is to interpret and make sense of things, increase self-understanding, enhance the awareness of one's own understanding and confrontations with the world, and help a reader in connecting otherwise disconnected life experiences. The degree of understanding a reader extracts from a piece of literature depends on the reader's stockpile of experience. (AEA)

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The Natural Underlying Structures of the Disciplines

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The Nature of Knowledge in Literature

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This is a moment of farflung controversy regarding the nature of imaginative literature, literary meaning, and the relation between texts and audiences. Semiotic and structuralist critics focus on the linguistic codes and conventions to which readers and writers must refer; frequently engaged in "deconstruction," they reject the identification of the power of literature with any notion of embodied meaning.[1] Rhetorical critics continue to concern themselves with the means by which intended meanings are communicated and intended effects produced.[2] Phenomenological critics lay stress upon aesthetic perception and the experience by which readers appropriate works of art.[3] As they see it, it is only through the act of realization that texts can be transformed into works of literature--poems, short stories, novels, plays. For all the differences and disagreements, however, there is a general acknowledgment that literature is neither mimetic nor referential, as discursive or pragmatic statements are

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referential. Fictions do not reflect, refer to, or disclose objective realities or particular states of affairs in the "outer" world.

Indeed, fictions bring into being illusioned or what Jean-Paul Sartre called "unreal" worlds[4] through the ways their authors use language and create equivalents for experience. What belongs to the sphere of fiction, therefore, cannot simply be abstracted from it and transferred to the general context of knowledge. We can "know," for example, a great deal about the manner in which the lawyer-narrator of "Bartleby the Scrivener"[5] formulates the reality of his Wall Street office, articulates the "forlornness" of Bartleby, strives to interpret the mystery. But whatever knowledge we gain about failure and loneliness and depersonalization cannot be made conceptually coherent with the body of knowledge that constitutes psychology or sociology. It cannot be corrected or validated; we can in no way assert that Melville or his narrator is "wrong." We can offer no counterexamples to Bartleby and his "I prefer not to." All we can do is criticize and interpret, try (from our own standpoints) to understand. When, as in the case of "Bartleby the Scrivener," what we are interpreting is an account of a (necessarily incomplete) interpretation, we may become conscious of our own decoding process and, at once, of the concepts or the aspects under which the experience of the story is appearing to us. Clearly, if the signs we are deciphering are alien to ordinary discourse, if there is nothing in our stockpile of experience that responds to the narrator's (or to Bartleby's) plight, we will find ourselves literally knowing nothing; and the text will be, to all intents and

purposes, mute.

Dorothy Walsh speaks of art as an "imaginative transformation of the given."[6] Where literature is concerned, this transformation is made possible by the exploitation of the connotative as well as the denotative meanings of the language used. Ambiguities are released; there are multiple levels of suggestiveness, even in a so-called "realistic" work. Consider "Bartleby" again: "Of a Sunday, Wall Street is deserted as Petra; and every night of every day it is an emptiness. This building, too, which of week-days hums with industry and life, at nightfall echoes with sheer vacancy, and all through Sunday is forlorn." Or consider Toni Morrison's description of the little town of Medallion in her novel, Sula:[7] "In that place, where they tore the nightshade and blackberry patches from their roots to make room for the Medallion City Golf Course, there was once a neighborhood. It stood in the hills above the valley town of Medallion and spread all the way to the river. It is called the suburbs now, but when black people lived there it was called the Bottom." Out of the ordering of language there emerges, as we can see, an illusioned world. The ordering, the imposition of a form, a framework is as important as the handling of the language. The forms of narrative are what distinguish the events within it from what happens in the ordinary world. In everyday life, things occur randomly, raggedly. As Sartre's Roquentin says in Nausea, "Nothing happens while you live. The scenery changes, people come in and go out, that's all. There are no

beginnings...But everything changes when you tell about life...."[8] Life only "makes sense," he suggests,when you tell a story about it. A work has form, wrote Kenneth Burke, "in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence";[9] this accounts, he said, for the satisfactions to be found, the desires that are fulfilled. Parts, particulars are made visible; they cohere; they refer to one another, imply one another, sometimes grate against each other, as the reader's anticipations intensify; and there is the possibility of a whole emerging, a structure of intelligibility. This is the "sense" Sartre's Roquentin is talking about; it is a potentiality within a specific story, a specific text.

A reader is required to realize that potentiality, to engage with the text and bring its meanings into being. Surely, there must be some acquaintance with the life of literary texts over time, with the ways in which artists learn from other artists,[10] extending what they have learned, recapitulating it, rejecting it, making something to some extent "new." There must be some understanding of what it signifies to move into illusioned worlds. A release into the imaginative mode of awareness is asked for, an ability to "bracket out" the stereotyped and the ordinary and the mundane.[11] The actual world must be there in its "absence"; but, while reading, the reader must suspend his/her awareness of the lack of correspondence between that world and the possible world to be discovered through engagement with the work. In addition to all this, there is the necessity to have some comprehension of language, not as a mere tool or instrument, but as the medium through

which the world presents itself to consciousness. The importance of actual speech ought to be held in mind; each silent reading of a text ought to be "a disguised form of oral interpretation"[12] so that the function of the work as an event in time can remain clear. It is not a static thing, not an abstract essence. There must always be a sense of movment, a sense of going beyond. Sartre points out that "the literary object, though realized through language, is never given in language."[13] It is a matter of moving beyond the words in order to project a synthetic form, a theme, a subject--to allow meanings to emerge.

There is considerable agreement now that the meanings in literary texts do not pre-exist. They are not secreted in the works; they are not there to be mined. A work of literature--Nausea, let us say, "Bartleby the Scrivener," The Great Gatsby--is not to be identified with the written words, with the text. It must be composed or created by the reader as he/she engages with the text, decodes it, interprets it, allows it to guide the structuring of his/her experience for a time. Wolfgang Iser lays stress upon the asymmetrical relation between the text and the reader.[14] No face-to-face situation exists, he reminds us; there is no way of ascertaining whether what is grasped is what the writer intended. So there is always a certain incompleteness of recognition, a sense of indeterminacy. Like Sartre, Iser makes the point that the function of the text is to activate the reader's own perceiving and processing, or what Sartre calls his/her creating.

> In a word, the reader is conscious of disclosing in creating, of creating by disclosing. In reality, it is not necessary to believe that reading is a mechanical operation and that signs make an impression on him as light does on a photographic plate. If he is inattentive, tired, stupid, or thoughtless, most of the relations will escape him. He will never manage to "catch on" to the object.... (15)

John Dewey, in his turn, writes about the ways in which meanings are "imaginatively summoned, assembled, and integrated" in response to the challenge of a work of art.[16] Whether the focus is on transactional relationships, or a dialectical relation between subject and object, the concern is with acts of ordering, acts of interpretation. However the encounter is described, there is always a recognition of indeterminacy, incompleteness, what Iser (and Dewey as well) calls "gaps."

Iser talks about phases of reading, about the continuing readjustment of projections as a work is realized under the guidance of the text. Because of the expectations latent in readers familiar with the western tradition, there is always an anticipation of complete resolution and coherence at the end; and the sense of tension between such anticipation and what is possible may intensify the awareness of incompleteness, indeed of insufficiency. But, as sentence complexes are unravelled, as semantic pointers are understood, a continuing process of synthesis goes on; and expectations are, to some extent, modified. Various perspectives are taken on the "world" gradually being revealed: the perspectives of the narrator, the hero or heroine, the characters, the reader. Frequently, they do not coincide; and the

reader, in search of the satisfaction that comes with completion, tries sometimes desperately to resolve the conflicts and bridge the gaps.

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In The Great Gatsby, for instance, we learn at the start that the narrative perspective is that of Nick Carraway, the advantaged and innocent midwesterner with a tendency to "reserve all judgments" and to hope. (Most readers, oddly, overlook the fact that the story is told in flashback, that it is a story told by a man shocked into new awareness by his contact with the "foul dust" of the east and his meeting with Jay Gatsby, roughneck and gangster, yet the only "decent one" of all the people Nick met.) There is so much "lifelikeness" in the tale that readers do not notice the contesting perspectives: Nick's, which is at odds with that of the wealthy Buchanans and the oppressed Wilsons, and as much at odds with that of the guests who crowd into Gatsby's on those resplendent blue nights; Gatsby's, based on a conviction that one could go back in time and at once pursue the grail, the "green light." But Nick is attracted to "something gorgeous" in Gatsby, to his "gift for hope," and even to his "Platonic image" of himself as the son of God who "must be about His Father's business, the service of a vast, vulgar, and meretricious beauty." The reader, also, may find this compelling, even as he/she glances over a shoulder at the billboard brooding over the Valley of Ashes, the gigantic "eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg" staring out of no face and, later, at the man "with the owl-eyed glasses" who comes to the funeral and does not give his name.

All this takes place within a perspective that is the hidden narrator's. He, too, broods in some sense; he judges; his social norms make the fictional universe what it is. The reader has somehow to be aware of the place of the norms in shaping the experience, as he/she has to be aware of the concepts that structure it. It is, in the last analysis, up to the reader to constitute the emerging universe, viewed from so many variable perspectives. Each gap he/she comes upon, each indeterminate space cannot but challenge him/her to summon up new possibilities, possibilities in accord with at least some of the perspectives taken within the book, if not with all. In doing so, in trying to impose some kind of order, to resolve the conflicts, the reader cannot but be in touch with his/her own constituting acts. In a sense, he/she is in the position of thinking about his/her own thinking, as people do (according to Dewey) when they "do" philosophy.

Also, because of the gaps and the dissonances, the reader is in the position to reach beyond, to experience incompeteness and the need to transcend. To experience this, to be conscious of expectation and what is not yet, is to feel one's freedom, to recognize that things may be otherwise than they are. That is what Sartre has in mind when he talks about the writer appealing to the reader's freedom ""to collaborate in the production of his work."[18] To appeal in this way is to move the reader to his/her own transcendence, to empower him/her to see more and to conceptualize more variously, diversify his/her perspectives upon the many-faceted world.

What, then, is the nature of knowledge in literature, apart from the "knowing how" required to constitute a work of art? It is clear enough that one does not go to literature to find privileged insights into some underlying "reality"; nor does one go to find propositional knowledge or verifiable truths. Nonetheless, because of the constant involvement of cognition and perception in aesthetic encounters, an enlarged vision of cognition may develop out of reflective engagements with imaginative literature. Experiences with imagination itself--imagination as a capacity to "bring the severed parts together,"[19] to make metaphors, to create new integral orders in experience--may well enrich the understanding of what it is to interpret and make sense of things. There is also the signal part played by emotion, sometimes by passion in aesthetic engagements. We know that some kind of feeling must be aroused by a work if the reader is to be inclined to enter it, to permit it to emerge in his/her consciousness. We think too seldom about what Israel Scheffler has called "cognitive emotions";[20] we do little, when we think of the knowing process, to overcome the either/ors that allow knowledge to become increasingly "unfeeling" and depersonalized.

None of this alters the fact that the worlds created by the language used to make literature are "as if" worlds, implying but not reflecting the so-called "real" world. We enter them by means of a mutual conspiracy that we freely join, if we know how to read. We reject them if we substitute our own illusions, our own stereotypes for what is offered to us in the text. We reject them too if we insist

on their incompatibility with a "reality" we think of as objectively given, alien to human ordering and intending, simply there. It is, as has been said, the case that we uncouple from common-sense, everyday reality when we begin participating in a literary work. That means that we set aside or put into parentheses habitual and conventional modes of sense-making. It is the case as well that we "bracket out" certain of the schemata associated with the natural and social sciences. We would be evading the search for meanings in "Bartleby the Scrivener" if we diagnosed Bartleby as a schizophrenic or defined his behavior as a kind of premature civil disobedience. We would be refusing the challenge of the text if we saw The Great Gatsby as social critique above all things, as an effort to expose the indecencies of the rich. This in no way lessens the value of alternative structurings (the everyday, the scientific, the sociological, the vocational, play, even dreams). It simply suggests that literature makes possible another way of seeing, an imaginative and metaphorical way that implicates the reader in a particular fashion. The novel, the short story, the poem refers, after all, to the reader's consciousness. That means that it refers to things as the reader intends them, to the world as it is grasped by his/her consciousness. The work may be seen as a kind of expression read by "a subject who is that expression." Mikel Dufrenne writes that "expression is the world as meaning--a world which is given before the objects in it."[21] He has in mind a meaning that "orients our apprehension of the real and renders brute givens meaningful." He has in mind a world that becomes the world for the personal

subject who is present to it, a world he/she may perceive in a different light because of his/her encounters with literature.

A work is a "transformation of the given," as we have seen, a "delineation of the possible."[22] This being so, the reader is enabled to see the familiar in an unfamiliar guise, to attend to his/her own past, his/her own stock of experience from a different vantage point. "The sense of increase of understanding, of a deepened intelligibility on the part of objects of nature and man, resulting from esthetic experience, has led philosophic theorists to treat art as a mode of knowledge....,"[23] Dewey wrote. And then he went on to point out that "the sense of disclosure and heightened intelligibility" can mean only that knowledge is transformed through aesthetic experience, not that new knowledge is gained. He concluded: "Tangled scenes of life are made more intelligible in esthetic experience: not, however, as reflection and science render things more intelligible by reduction to conceptual form, but by presenting their meanings as the matter of a clarified, coherent, and intensified or 'impassioned' experience."[24]

We can say, then, that literature makes understanding possible more than knowing. To encounter a text and to realize it as a work of art is to forge meanings; at once it is to interrogate the work and allow the work to interrogate the engaged self. Not only may there be increased self-understanding; there may be enhanced awareness of one's own understanding, one's own confrontation with the world. The world may be seen as never before; it may be named

anew. To name, to articulate in this fashion is to make visible and palpable what may have had no contour, what could not hitherto be seen. To create contours, to make new connections in experience and new patterns is to be prepared to make new kinds of sense. "The legitimation of art," writes Richard Palmer, "is that it discloses being to our self-understanding, so that our own world, the horizon within which we live and move and have our whole existence, is broadened and given greater definition."[25] It is within that wider world that we are moved to pose our problems and to know.

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